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Émile Durkheim: A Biography by Marcel Fournier

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Fournier, Marcel, *Émile Durkheim: A Biography*. Trans. David Macey. Cambridge: Polity, 2013. viii + 866 pages. Hardcover, \$60.00.

The philosopher Roland Barthes once referred to biography as “fiction that dares not speak its name.”¹ This accusation cannot fairly be leveled at sociologist Marcel Fournier’s biography of Émile Durkheim, which accounts for both its strengths and its weaknesses. Not so much an argument as an explanation, Fournier’s work documents how Durkheim created modern sociology in France.

In addition to numerous scholarly articles on Durkheim and his era, Fournier has published two works on Marcel Mauss, Durkheim’s nephew and one of his closest disciples. In order to write these works, Fournier consulted private resources from the families connected to his subjects, as well as new resources available because of the recent revival of Durkheimian studies. For this reason, his bibliography in the present volume is exhaustive. Durkheim’s only other major biography, published in 1985 by Steven Lukes, before all this new material became available, makes Fournier’s work well justified.

Immersing himself in the period of his subject’s life with detached objectivity, Fournier’s biography, more than Lukes’s, follows Durkheim’s life in a strictly chronological fashion, which he breaks down into five periods: childhood and education, his teaching career at various *lycée*, the professorship at Bordeaux, his later move to Paris and the Sorbonne, and finally the First World War. Half the book is devoted to what Fournier considers Durkheim’s most creative period at Bourdeaux, where he completed his doctorate, published three of his four major works (*The Division of Labor in Society*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, and *Suicide*), and instituted the professional journal, *L’Année sociologique*. During this period, Durkheim put out twelve issues of the journal, and Fournier devotes considerable attention to each. By his title “L’Année sociologique: Birth of a Team,” Fournier seems to suggest that the founder of French sociology could hardly have been expected to do it alone. In these works, Durkheim also introduced the academic world to the concepts of “anomie,” which he thought accounted for many of the problems of his era, and of “social facts,” the existence of which justified sociology as an independent and scientific discipline. Fournier discusses Durkheim’s career year after year and paper after paper, allowing him to demonstrate his subject’s passionate commitment to sociology and his willingness to do battle with everyone who opposed him. Fournier challenges the widely held perception that Durkheim was inordinately hostile to psychology, maintaining instead that he was only seeking to create an independent place for sociology.

Throughout his career, Durkheim was committed to the Third Republic with its triple virtues of democracy, science, and secularism. It was only in his last major work that he dealt with religion. His father, a rabbi, had assumed that Durkheim would follow in that tradition, but Émile abandoned religion as a youth. In 1895, however, he experienced what he called a “revelation” that enabled him to see the importance of religion in the evolution of social life, and that led to his last work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (1912). In it, Durkheim focused his attention upon the religious practices of aboriginal tribes in Australia as a way to understand the nature of advanced religions like Christianity. His central thesis was that there exists a moral force that it is the source of religion and that this moral force is the “collective force” (p. 607). Religious beliefs arise out of the community that practices them in order to serve its collective needs. God, in short is a construction of the community, albeit a useful one.

Durkheim died in November of 1917 at age fifty-nine. Contemporary opinion, Fournier suggests, blamed a generally weak constitution exacerbated by the death of his son, André, in the war.

Fournier also discusses Durkheim's pedagogical theories, his administrative work, and political activism, particularly in the context of the Dreyfus Affair and the First World War. Finally, he discusses Durkheim's economic ideas and somewhat ambiguous relationship with socialism. Unfortunately, many personal questions about Durkheim the reader might have wished to be answered are not. During the Nazi occupation of Paris, Fournier explains, the Gestapo requisitioned Durkheim's daughter's home and threw out all of his personal papers.

This reviewer, while favorably disposed to the work, has two reservations. First, where Durkheim's earlier biographer, Steven Lukes, engages the reader in a critical evaluation of Durkheim, his works, and methods, the only critical voices that appear in Fournier's 866 pages are those of Durkheim's opponents. The nearest Fournier comes to an evaluation of his subject is the last sentence of the work, when he writes, "The work of Emile Durkheim is beginning to show its age and yet, 150 years after his birth, it has lost none of its contemporary relevance or its acuity" (p.733). While the author could claim that contemporary schools of sociology and their disputes are beyond the scope of his work, addressing some of them, at least in the epilogue, would have strengthened his case. For this reason, Lukes's work is still worth reading. Second, some editing of Durkheim's endless debates and the detailed accounts of the agonies involved in getting out all twelve issues of the journal would have made the work stronger.

On the positive side, Fournier's work, as rendered by its translator David Macey, is eminently readable. If one is interested in the classical age of sociology or the intellectual history of the period, this work is well worth the effort. Fournier has made a lasting contribution to Durkheimian studies and the history of sociology, and his work should be available in every academic library.

NOTE

¹ Quoted in Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky, eds. *Lights, Camera, History* (Arlington: University of Texas, 2007), 13.

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